

Billions for Gorby; Bum's Rush For the Baltics

President Bush's credit for the Kremlin this week also came with a private warning to Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze: Don't crack down in the Baltic republics.

Mr. Bush made the plea in his private meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev's messenger, and I'm told Secretary of State James Baker made an even more forceful case. How seriously Mr. Shevardnadze—known as "Shevy" to U.S. officials—takes this message-to-Mikhail will determine whether Mr. Bush is mightily embarrassed during what will be the Soviet Union's roughest winter since 1941. Having hooked the Kremlin to the U.S. Treasury, he has to hope his new partner Gorby keeps his Cheka in check.

Mr. Bush can't say he wasn't warned if there is a Soviet crackdown. On Monday, he met with the president of Lithuania, Vytautas Landsbergis, who showed him the other face of the Soviet regime.

Mr. Landsbergis is exactly the sort of visitor Mr. Bush dislikes, a public beacon of principle in the murky, private world of "national interest." This week he was also the forgotten man. Iraq has knocked the great story of the collapsing Soviet empire from page one. At press meetings, the Balt could draw only a few outrider journalists.

That's a shame, because the professorial Lithuanian, soft-spoken and slight, brings up uncomfortable facts, like the 50 years of U.S. support for "captive nations." Earlier this year he compared Mr.

Potomac Watch

By Paul A. Gigot

Bush to Neville Chamberlain. This week he kept his cool, but spoke of Kremlin intimidation and asked for help.

President Bush offered a photo-op but nothing else in public. Formal U.S. recognition of the Baltics would anger Moscow. A "four-plus-three" plan—the four victors of World War II meeting to discuss the last three victims, the Baltic states—was out of the question.

Even a public declaration that a crackdown would damage U.S.-Soviet ties was deemed too risky. The most that White House Gorbaphiles would utter in public was some tepid diplomatese: "The President . . . hoped the Soviet government would work constructively with Baltic leaders, without resorting to threats, intimidation or the use of force." The last time the U.S. expressed that sort of mild "hope," Saddam Hussein took Kuwait.

The private warning to Shevy was at least something, but it still leaves Baltic sympathizers glum. "Look, we are a player in the Baltic states whether we like it or not," says one mid-level State Department official outside the Baker inner-circle. "And now when there is crackdown—and I think there will be—we're going to get blamed."

Some fear a creeping Tiananmen Square is already underway. In the Ukraine, members of the Rukh nationalist party were beaten by militia last week. A member of the Ukraine Supreme Soviet and veteran of the notorious Perm 35 Siberian labor camp, Stepan Khmara, has been arrested again on purely political grounds. He's staging a desperate hunger strike.

Moscow's official talk, if words are to be believed, is ominous. KGB boss Vladimir Kryuchkov said this week that, "The KGB has made its choice to defend the socialist motherland." He declared war on "anti-communist" forces, which by now means 90% of the country. One military member of parliament called for a "state of emergency" and the suspension of open politics. Mr. Gorbachev gave his own hard-line speech this week denouncing the separatist republics.

Gorby has also devoted recent weeks to steam-rolling a new "union treaty" into law. "A very strange treaty," says Mr. Landsbergis, since it's designed to deny the only thing the Balts and other republics want—a path to independence. Mr. Gorbachev clings to his collapsing union, threatening a cutoff of food, energy and raw materials if the Balts don't toe his line. Oleg Bogomolov, an establishment economist (and adviser to Russian republic leader Boris Yeltsin), recently described Gorby as a hostage to the army and KGB.



Vytautas Landsbergis

The Landsbergis-Shevardnadze appearances nicely frame today's Soviet debate. Shevy, speaking for Mr. Gorbachev, takes the Orwellian position that the Soviet Union has to centralize in order to de-centralize; in effect only a dictator can create Soviet democracy. Mr. Landsbergis says instead, create a democracy by actually democratizing.

Shevy says he fears a new anger among republican nationalists; the Balt says the mood will only get angrier if power isn't spun off from Moscow. Shevy says only the communist powers-that-be can create a free-market economy; the Balt says the communists will fight private markets every step of the way.

Messrs. Bush and Baker have sided with Shevy, at least symbolically. They certainly know the new U.S. farm credits won't help much in practice. Next week the International Monetary Fund will release its study of the Soviet economy, concluding (says one official) that it's "an absolute disaster, deteriorating quickly." Foreign cash is a lone life preserver aboard the Titanic.

Mr. Bush can say he is trying to prevent "instability," and of course there are U.S. foreign-policy interests to think about. Shevy has helped on Iraq and Nicaragua, and may yet on Cuba, Vietnam and Angola. But there is usually a price to be paid for abandoning principle; let's hope the Baltic people don't do the paying.